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Gain

Richard Powers

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GAIN

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About The Author

Richard Powers is the author of seven novels. *Operation Wandering Soul* was shortlisted for the US National Book Award and *Galatea 2.2,* was shortlisted for the US National Book Critics' Circle Award.

ALSO BY RICHARD POWERS

Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance
Prisoner's Dilemma
The Gold Bug Variations
Operation Wandering Soul
Galatea 2.2
Plowing the Dark

Day had a way of shaking Lacewood awake. Slapping it lightly, like a newborn. Rubbing its wrists and reviving it. On warm mornings, you remembered: this is why we do things. Make hay, here, while the sun shines. Work, for the night is coming. Work now, for there is no work in the place where you are going.

May made it seem as if no one in this town had ever sinned. Spring unlocked the casements. Light cured the oaks of lingering winter doubt, lifting new growth from out of nothing, leaving you free again to earn your keep. When the sun came out in Lacewood, you could live.

Lacewood's trace began everywhere: London, Boston, Fiji, Disappointment Bay. But everywhere's trail ended in this town, where folks made things. Some mornings, when the sun shone, history vanished. The long road of arrival disappeared, lost in the journey still in store.

At first, the town subsisted on the overhauled earth. Wild prairie weeds gave way to grain, a single strain of edible grass, grown on a scale that made even grass pay. Later, Lacewood graduated to human wizardry, thrived on alchemical transformation. Growth from bone meal and bat guano. Nourishment from shale. Breakthroughs followed one upon the other, as surely as May followed April.

There must have been a time when Lacewood did not mean Clare, Incorporated. But no one remembered it. No one alive was old enough to recall. The two names always

came joined in the same breath. All the grace ever shed on Lacewood flowed through that company’s broad conduit. The big black boxes on the edge of town sieved diamonds from out of the mud. And Lacewood became the riches that it made.

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Forever, for anyone who would listen, Lacewood liked to trot out the tale of how it tricked its way into fortune. At its deciding moment, when the town had to choose between the sleepy past and the tireless nineteenth century, it did not think twice. With the ease of one born to it, Lacewood took to subterfuge.

The townsfolk felt no qualms about their ruse, then or ever. If they felt anything, it was pride. They laid their snare for the fifth Mr. Clare, the namesake president of an Eastern firm that had lately outgrown its old markets. Clare Soap and Chemical was heading West, seeking new hosts. The fifth Mr. Clare was looking for the ideal site to build the burgeoning business’s latest plant.

Douglas Clare, Sr., secretly preferred the aroma of Lacewood to the scent of Peoria. Lacewood smelled clean and distilled. Peoria was a little too unctuous and pomaded. He liked this place for a number of reasons. But he kept mum, sporting the indifference of a cagey suitor.

The fifth Mr. Clare could not say exactly what he was looking for in a future site. But he always claimed he’d recognize the place when he laid eyes on it. Even that most resourceful businessman could not call this location central. But the country’s growth would yet center it. Lacewood sat on train lines connecting St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Louisville. It lay a reasonable freight haul away from Chicago, the West’s lone metropolis. And land in this vacancy was still dirt cheap.

Lacewood decided to doll itself up, to look like what it thought Clare wanted. Weeks before the visit, the town began papering over its crumbling warehouses with false fronts. Every boy over ten turned builder. The mayor even had two blocks of plaster edifices erected to fatten out anemic Main Street.

For the duration of the company tour, the town rented an old Consolidation locomotive. It ran the engine up and down the line at frequent intervals, rearranging the consist for the sake of drama. The freight even discharged a much fussed-over load at the suspiciously new station. Ten hours later, it returned from the other direction and hauled the crates of gravel away.

Clare and his advisers saw through the whole charade. One glance told the Easterners that the decaying antique hadn’t seen service in over a decade. Peoria had run much the same stunt. And its fake façades had been fancier.

But necessity drove Lacewood beyond Peoria’s wildest invention. Long in advance of its August inspection, Lacewood dammed up its sleepy little stretch of the Sawgak, just upriver of town. Ordinarily, the pathetic trickle didn’t even dampen the dust on a muskrat’s whiskers. But for four glorious days in the heat of late summer, the town council built itself a junior torrent.

At key intervals, Lacewood posted several fishers who passed as either entrepreneurs or sportsmen, depending on the light. With uncanny regularity, the anglers struggled to land a series of mighty northern pike: fat from off the land, food from nothing, from honest labor.

The fact that *Esox lucius*, the species these men pulled like clockwork from the synthetic rapids, had never on its own accord strayed south of Minnesota touched Mr. Clare. He admired the industry, the pathos in the stratagem. He could work with these people. They would work for him.

He glowered throughout the length of the inspection. He shook his head continually. At the last instant before heading back to Boston in his private Pullman—whose builder, up in Pullman, Illinois, had recently created an ingenious live-in factory town that supplied all his employees' needs—Clare acquiesced. Sighing, he accepted the massive tax concessions proffered him in perpetuity, and closed the deal.

And that's how Clare Soap and Chemical came to stay.

Years later, just in time to stave off the worst of the Great Depression, the globe's largest producer of earth-moving equipment dropped its world headquarters down in Peoria. Caterpillar played for more than fifty straight profitable years and ran up its annual sales to over $13 billion by the game's twilight, at century's end.

But Lacewood never complained. Without Clare, the town would have dozed forever. It would have stayed a backwoods wasteland until the age of retrotourism. With Clare, Lacewood grew famous, part of an empire of three dozen production facilities in ten countries, "making answers, meeting needs."

Lacewood joined the ride gladly, with both feet. It got the goose it bargained for, and more. For over a century, Clare laid countless clutches of eggs whose gold only the niggling would stoop to assay.

WELCOME TO LACEWOOD. POPULATION 92,400. ROTARY, ELKS, LIONS. BOYHOOD HOME OF CALE TUFTS, OLYMPIC LEGEND. SISTER CITY OF ROUEN, FRANCE, AND LUDHIANA, INDIA. SITE OF SAWGAK COLLEGE. NORTH AMERICAN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS DIVISION HEADQUARTERS, CLARE INTERNATIONAL

PLEASE BUCKLE UP

May, just before Memorial Day, just this side of millennium's end. Up on North Riverside, on the good side of the river, a Lacewood woman works her garden. A woman who has never thought twice about Clare.

Sure she knows it: the name is second nature. Traders on the Frankfurt Bürse mouth "Clare" at the mention of Lacewood, the way they point and go "bang" whenever they meet someone from Chicago. Teens in Bangkok covet anything bearing the company's logo. Whole shipping-container sunrooms in São Paulo are emblazoned with it. The firm built her entire town, and then some. She knows where her lunch comes from. Which side of her bread bears the non-dairy spread.

She drives past Clare's Agricultural Division headquarters at least three times a week. The town cannot hold a corn boil without its corporate sponsor. The company cuts every other check, writes the headlines, sings the school fight song. It plays the organ at every wedding and packs the rice that rains down on the departing honeymooners. It staffs the hospital and funds the ultrasound sweep of uterine seas where Lacewood's next of kin lie gray and ghostly, asleep in the deep.

She knows what it makes as well as anyone. Soap, fertilizers, cosmetics, comestibles: name your life-changing category of substances. But still, she knows Clare no better than she knows Grace or Dow. She does not work for the corporation or for anyone the corporation directly owns. Neither does any blood relation or any loved one.

The woman kneels in her garden, kneading her fifty square feet of earth. She coaxes up leaves, gets them to catch a teacupful of the two calories per cubic centimeter that the sun, in its improvident abundance, spills forever on

the earth for no good reason except that it knew we were coming.

Some nasty bug has already begun to nibble her summer squash in the bud. Another goes after her beans. She responds with an arsenal of retaliations. Beer to ward off slugs. Lemon-scented dish soap in solution, spritzed liberally to counter beetle insurgencies. Home remedies. Stronger measures when strength is needed.

She transplants flowers outdoors from their starter beds. The work is play; the labor, love. This is the afternoon she slaves all week for. The therapeutic complement to the way she makes a living: moving families from starter homes into larger spreads.

Spring releases her. The early oriental poppies unwad like her children's birthday crepe. The alpine columbine spread their two-toned trumpets, an ecstatic angel choir. Every growing thing looks like something else to her. Her mind hums as she weeds, hungry to match each plant with its right resemblance.

Tight, hard globes of Christmas ornament relax into peonies. Daisies already droop their tutus like sad, also-ran, Degas dancers. Bleeding hearts hang in group contrition. She urges them on, each to its colored destiny. No human act can match gardening. She would do it all day long, if she could.

The ballet school sponsors. The ones who pay for the TV that nobody ever watches. The annual scholarships for the erector-set kids at the high school. The trade-practice lawsuits she hasn't the patience to follow, and the public service announcements she never entirely understands. The drop-dead-cute actress who has the affair with the guy next door in that series of funny commercials that everyone at the office knows by heart. The old company head who served in the cabinet during World War II. She hums the

corporate theme song to herself sometimes, without realizing.

Two pots in her medicine cabinet bear the logo, one to apply and one to remove. Those jugs under the sink—Avoid Contact with Eyes—that never quite work as advertised. Shampoo, antacid, low-fat chips. The weather stripping, the grout between the quarry tiles, the nonstick in the nonstick pan, the light coat of deterrent she spreads on her garden. These and other incarnations play about her house, all but invisible.

This woman, forty-two years old, looks up into the gathering May sky and wrinkles her nose. Yesterday's *Post-Chronicle* predicted azure. But no point in second-guessing yesterday, with today coming on like there's no tomorrow. Her seedlings are further along than Memorial Day could have hoped. A dollar twenty-nine, two spritzes of lemon dish soap, and a little loving effort can still keep one in squash all summer.

The woman's name is Laura Rowen Bodey. She is the newest member of Next Millennium Realty's Million Dollar Movers Club. Her daughter has just turned seventeen, her son is twelve and a half. Her ex-husband does development for Sawgak College. She sees a married man, quietly and infrequently. Her life has no problem that five more years couldn't solve.

A woman who has heard, yet has not heard. And on this day, no one but the six people who love her gives her a moment's thought.

Business ran in the Clares' blood long before the first one of them made a single thing.

That family flocked to commerce like finches to morning. They clung to the watery edge of existence: ports, always ports. They thrived in tidal pools, half salt, half sweet. Brackish, littoral. They lived less in cities than on the sea routes between them.

Clare was, from the first, transnational. Family merchants traded in England for the better part of a century, specializing in a bold shipping commerce that ruined and made their fortunes several times a year. Each generation refined the gamble. Jephthah Clare drank in gambling with his mother's milk. He gambled the way he breathed.

Jephthah fled the mother country in a hurry, on a wager gone wrong. He left in 1802, the year the aristocrat du Pont, escaping the French turmoil, set up his gunpowder mill in Delaware. Jephthah Clare ran from a more prosaic chaos: not wrongdoing, exactly, but failure to share inside knowledge of a collapse in sugar beet prices with an excitable trading partner upon whom he had just settled a considerable shipment. After his house in Liverpool burned, Jephthah thought it wise not to await further repayment.

He, his wife, and three small children sailed unannounced. They stowed away on one of Clare's own packet traders. For the length of the crossing, the family slept on a cargo of Wedgwood Egyptian stoneware. The pain of the passage eased as soon as they and the plates disembarked upon India Wharf, in Boston, America. That thorny pallet of freight paid the family's way toward a comfort that outlasted all memory of the uncomfortable voyage.

The greatest meliorator of the world is selfish, huckstering Trade.

—EMERSON, “Works and Days”

Jephthah Clare cared not where he landed, so long as he could reach the all-delivering ocean. He sold his Wedgwood plates and leased a countinghouse adjacent to Long Wharf. Starting with that one salvaged packet, rechristened the *Rough Bed*, he commenced one of the most lucrative schemes in the long and august history of commercial laundering.

France and Britain, eternally at war, blockaded each other’s colonial trade. Clare sent the *Rough Bed* down to Jamaica and loaded it with coffee and molasses. He called these barrels back up to Boston Harbor, where they became, by the magic of paperwork, American coffee, American treacle. These he could then take to London, where the pinched combatants paid hand over fist for their deliverance. In the interests of fair play, he now and then took American rum to Le Havre, courtesy of Guadeloupe.

This dress-up game lasted for a full four years. Jephthah Clare extracted his markup both coming and going. When the belligerents at last closed down the trickery in 1807, Jephthah cursed Jefferson’s embargo and turned smuggler. For every ship impounded, two more came in to pay the bribes and ransom, with a little bit left over.

That margin secured him a house in Temple Place. From this base, Jephthah strolled out daily to his favored haunts in Merchants Row. He struck deals in Topliff’s Reading Rooms. He traded gossip in the Exchange, learning which packets had come in and which were overdue. He waited for the semaphores from Nantasket to reach the sentry on

Constitution Wharf with word of the *Favored*, the *North Port*, the *New Jerusalem*.

When the embargo at last grew too risky to flout, Clare fell back upon longer runs. He dispatched New England goods to the Oregon country. There he exchanged his stock for furs. These furs he sent across the Pacific, to Canton, where his hong could not get enough of them. Furs bought tea in profuse bouquets. Tea came back home at a profit sufficient to buy ten new shipments of cheap New England goods. For truly:

> *The one thing Home cannot supply*
> *Is that which hails from far away.*

The sheer markup of distance sufficed to begin the whole self-enriching triangle all over again.

The world had to be circumnavigated before the humblest washerwoman could sip from her ragged cup. The mystery of it all sometimes visited Jephthah at night. It played in his drafty thoughts as he and his uncomprehending Sarah lay under the eiderdown in their timbered bedroom, tight against the night's worst incursions. He, the Oregon trapper, the Chinese hong: everyone prospered. Each of them thought he'd gotten the better end of the deal. Now, how could that be? Where had the profit come from? Who paid for their mutual enrichment?

The port of Fayal, in the Azores, turned whale oil into wine. A trip to the Sandwich Islands sufficed to change percussion-cap rifles into sandalwood. Everyone everywhere wanted what was only to be had somewhere else. Jephthah shipped Dutch herring to Charleston and Boston cod to Lisbon. For a while, he made a fortune selling white silk hats from France to New York gentlemen, until his competitors bought up a shipment and gave them away free to Negroes, discrediting the style.

Yet the man who moved these goods around the globe could not sell to Ohio. The prospect had no profit in it. The nine dollars that moved a ton of goods from Europe to Boston moved that same ton no more than thirty miles inland.

But on the sea, Jephthah engaged in the entire range of merchanting. He owned some ships outright and hired others. He bought and sold on his own account, acted as another's commissioned agent, exported and imported, traded with jobbers and factors. At times, he even vended directly to shopkeepers. He shipped and insured and financed, open to any deal or part thereof.

A memory for trustworthiness and great patience for paper labyrinths saw him through many setbacks. Competence returned cash, and cash bought competence. Jephthah handled cotton and indigo and potash. But above all else, he dealt in risk. Profit equaled uncertainty times distance. The harder it was to haul a thing to where it humanly belonged, the more one made.

Jephthah loved best those deals that others deplored. He joined a venture to ship ice to Martinique, lately ravaged by yellow fever. In this, neither altruism nor profit moved him. He took on the trade simply because all his fellow merchants considered it mad. Whatever the mind of man stood unanimous against probably had some merit to it.

He tithed to charity, an easy speculation in both good and bad weather. It carried almost no downside risk, while the potential upside was considerable. Ten percent of a thousand might conceivably swamp the thousand a thousandfold in returned investment. Ten percent of nothing, on the other hand, cost a man nothing.

THINGS TO DO TODAY

Sixteen rectangles run across a two-page spread, bordered like a colonial sampler. Each carries one imperative underneath a familiar package.

Rise and Shine
(Viva-cleanse)

Put On a Happy Face
(Clarity Pore Purifier)

Make Some Noise with Those Pots and Pans
(Slickote Surface)

Provide for the Common Defense
(Compleet Daily Supplements)

Clear the Air
(Blue Spruce Vapogard)

Hit the Road, Jack
(All-Weather Gravel-Grippers)

Bring Home the Bacon
(Heat ‘n’ Eat)

Clean Up Your Act
(Sterisol)

Be Fruitful and
(Multi-pli Maxiwipes)

Tie One On

(Infinistik)

Put Your Best Foot Forward
(Leather Lifts)

Shed a Little Lite on the Subject
(Fat-Fighter Spreads)

Soothe the Savage Breast
(Gastrel Caps)

Hold Everything
(Lok-Toppers)

Cover All Your Bases
(Clareglow No-fume Enamel)

Party ’til the Cows Come Home
(Partifest Non-dari Treats)

The Consumer Goods Group
CLARE MATERIAL SOLUTIONS

At last, conflagration came home. Embargo failed to keep Europe’s blood from America’s doorstep. But Jephthah Clare saw, even in Mr. Madison’s War, new chances for expansion. The old tithing speculator spread his risks, taking his certainty from the world’s confusion.

When his high-seas routes began piling up losses, he placed himself in the service of the United States and turned to privateering. He passed along to the government

a share of the spoils his ships picked from slower British merchantmen. This pirate tax bought both his nation's blessing and its weapons.

War's end found the family with markets in burghs that had not existed until the chaos of 1812 sprouted them. Only Irénée du Pont, whose gunpowder mills held his belligerent country captive, came through the conflict sadder about peace.

One by one, Jephthah honed his sons to begin life's journey as sassafras and come back home as sterling. He sent Samuel, the eldest, to sea to graduate. Resolve, the middle boy, finished his education in the business, apprenticed to the countinghouse. Jephthah's first daughter, Rachael, went to a Liverpool cotton factor in exchange for ten years of favorable credit.

American-born Benjamin attended Harvard College, even finishing a degree. Business steady, Jephthah let his youngest drift into advanced study of Botany. The mere existence of such a field instilled in Jephthah a scornful pride. Two other American-born Clares failed to outlive the school of their infant diseases.

Clare and Sons had only to hold up their hands and let the magic skein of trade loop itself around their outstretched fingers. Nothing new arose along the self-replenishing arc except the *ad valorem* matching of the needy with the need. But whatever value the Clares added by moving goods to their proper locales, the events of 1828 conspired to negate. In that year, all liquidity threatened to evaporate.

The laws of God shipped cotton to Liverpool and sent it back to Boston as whole cloth. The laws of the fledgling Senate rose up and inquired: whither, and why? Could not government simply say how much a thing would cost, and

thereby make worth’s rivers run down hills of our own devising?

But the Tariff of Abominations turned on its makers, erasing twenty years of native industry in one stroke. Sowing protection reaped disaster. Prices for raw materials and fabricated goods exploded overnight. Yankee commerce burst in air as convincingly as Key’s celebrated bombs. Tax now sucked all advantage from Clare’s intricate system of interlocking runs. The voyages out paid too little to foot the crippling return leg. Receipts failed to pay off costs. Trade no longer even broke even.

Clare the Elder grinned at having lost the last roll of the dice. He made ready to deliver himself to earth’s long deficit. For his wife, he arranged what hedges against destitution he could. Then he headed for the coffeehouses on Long Wharf to wait for the winds to change. He left it to his sons to tidy up the last entries in Abomination’s double ledger.

Funerals are for the living. Her mother liked to say that. More times than Laura cares to remember. Death was different, a lifetime ago.

She leans in to the mirror, trying not to block her own light. It should be easier, making up in full daylight. Her eyelids say otherwise. She closes one, touches the tip of a pinkie to adjust the indigo. They used to go to a funeral every other week, when she was little. Kind of gone out of fashion these days.

She lightens the lines at her eyes' east and west, wresting her girlhood's gaze back from its wrinkled halo. She stares into the silvered glass, looking for herself at age ten. Hearing: *Funerals are for the living*. Thinking: *Funerals are for my mother*.

She tries to imagine her father in a dark suit, shaking hands, standing about looking solemn. Bearing a coffin or driving in the cortege. Doing the heavy lifting, that bare minimum of the joint tenancy contract that males always get away with. But he does not come back to her, even that much.

Her mother runs all her memory's funerals. Baking the stupid spinach casseroles. Washing the picked-over plates that people leave all over the dead person's home. Shushing the shrieks. Keeping the collapsing widows from flinging themselves into the open dirt hole. Visiting the deserted, three times a month for the rest of her own abbreviated days.

Laura worries her mascara brush through miniature arcs. She flicks her lashes like a fresco restorer, returning what time has hidden. She tilts her head against the harsh fluorescence, and suddenly that missing girl stares back at her, caught in mid-girl's thought. *Funerals are for my*

mother. I'll never have to do any of this. Look at polio. Look at smallpox. Disease is just a passing holdover from when we lived wrong. It's all been a terrible mistake. My parents and their friends: the last generation that will have to die.

She looks again, and the girl is gone. Her face has become her mother's, despite the blush. She sports her mother's little tics and turns. Her voice is her mother's, even this afternoon, trying to console Ellen, telling her that funerals were for the living.

Her first must have been Uncle Robert. Laura, maybe eight. Her uncle, a T-shirted ex-Marine in those three stray Polaroids. A healthy ten years younger at death than she is now.

Would you like to go to the wake? that voice, now hers, asked her.

The question, too much to answer.

That's fine, sweetie. Sometimes people like to remember others the way they …

No, no: her horror, squeezing up into her throat like puked sour milk. Panic jamming the exits, like a crowd in a burning theater. Wake? They're going to try to *wake* him?

Later that year, the funeral of a man at church who got electrocuted in a lake in Wisconsin. Distant enough to turn out without much distress. Laura and little Scotty, starting middle school, there just to learn forever never to swim in a thunderstorm.

After that, her last surviving grandparent, her father's mother. A merciful death, by any measure. Surely better off, wherever she was going, than in her body during its last four years.

Worst was her mother's sister, a closed-casket car wreck. The death was easy. What it did to the living almost killed her. Watching her mother in her grief. The woman

she knew best in the world, an utter stranger. Her mother's own funeral was a blessing in comparison.

Then Don's mother, who even before Laura and Don got married liked to send Laura Christmas cans of high-fat Virginia nuts signed "Love, Mom." That absurdity of the surgeon's: the operation was a success, but she died in recovery.

The thought strikes her as she finishes her face. As she makes her lips look as if she has done nothing to them. Ellen's first funeral, and she's already twice as old as Laura was at her first. But Laura's first was a vague abstraction. Ellen's first is her girlfriend Nan.

Everyone knew, and no one admitted. Nan at the end, almost invisible. Away most weeks, until Laura lost track. The last four months, chasing specialists, up in Minneapolis, out in Boston. Then wasting at home, eclipsed in her growing bed, body a brown curl of hair snipped and laid upon the pillow.

The girl that died was half the size of the girl four years ago, the one Laura met when she sold the Liebers that split-level on the rolling lot across from what was then still cornfield. Ellen had come on the last house visit prior to closing. The real estate agent's braided, same-age kid: probably helped nail down the deal.

The two girls hated each other. Some altercation involving one of them flinging the other's Malibu Ken Grungewear out the Aerostar's window. A year and a half later, they were inseparable, swapping wardrobes all the way down to each other's favorite shoes and socks. Nan still used shoes, still walking then.

Ellen's port-wine birth stain, meeting Nan's almost imperceptible limp. *Say anything about either one of us and you're toast*. An unspoken mutual defense contract, binding them together for life.

But birth stain lifted. Four trips under the laser lightened Ellen’s shame. Plastic surgeons burned her crimson temple back to normal. Nan cheered the emergence of her friend’s belated beauty, even as unstoppable rot ate away her muscles.

Ellen was their designated emissary, in the last months. Their runner, their diplomat, their spy. Launching forays for both girls into the kingdom of boys and boy products. Returning her awful intelligence reports at regular intervals. Seeking advice, long after Nan could reply. Nan, paralyzed foal, bent in the bed sheets, peering up through unfocusing disks, gurgling her guttural placeholders for delight.

Laura followed Nan’s downward progress, in all the things her daughter wouldn’t tell her. All the scraps from silence’s table. The specialists were a bust. Nan weakened with each meal she failed to work down her throat. Her muscles frayed like shoelaces tugged on beyond their allotted span.

The grapevine passed along the updates, with all the meticulous attention it pays to the grim. No one could claim ignorance. But no one followed out the girl’s curve to the only place it could land. No one once practiced for this early graduation.

Tim refuses to go to the service. “I’d rather remember her how she was.” In fact, he’d rather stay home and play on the computer. He’s been logging way too many on-line hours these days. Laura needs to start rationing him, force him outside, get him a bike or something equally archaic.

She chooses a natural, leafy scent that will not clash with massed funeral bouquets. Ellen is a mess. “Honey, not a sweatshirt. Don’t you want to look nice?”

“No.”